

Michael Jackson and Senator Ted Kennedy: Lessons Learned



**BRENTWOOD
FUNERAL
SERVICES**

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What happens when death loses meaning? Does life then have less value? And what responsibility does a funeral home have in maintaining the traditions that make ours a civilized society?

I contend that the rituals associated with death are, in fact, a celebration of a life that's been lived. I further believe that these rituals help bind us together as a society and better recognize the value of every life. As funeral directors, we have a responsibility to nurture and maintain these rituals. This is especially true at a time when demand for cremation is rising, a formal funeral service is no longer a given, and family members are often geographically apart.

How should our profession respond to these changing dynamics?

First, we must execute flawlessly. Grieving families often lose the ability to "roll with the punches" and what might otherwise be a minor inconvenience becomes a major issue. The death of a loved one also can trigger family conflicts. We must avoid any and all errors that can upset the family and otherwise diminish the funeral experience.

This flawless execution extends to the friends attending the visitation and/or service. Make parking as easy as possible, assigning staff to direct traffic if necessary. Music plays outside my funeral homes in an effort to envelope visitors in the funeral home experience as they approach. Inside, directions should be clear. No one wants to stumble into a visitation or service for someone with whom they have no connection. Amenities such as water fountains, restrooms, and smoking areas also should be easy to find. Remember that anyone attending a visitation or funeral could be the next person who needs to make a funeral buying decision. This makes creating a positive experience for every visitor an important marketing tool.

Second, we must help families remember that many people's lives have been touched by the deceased or they have a special relationship with family members and want the opportunity to participate in some way as well. Too often, families believe they are making it easier for mourners by scheduling visitations immediately prior to the funeral. Despite their best intentions, this rarely is the case.

We should continue promoting evening or weekend visitations. This allows an opportunity for participation by those

with work schedules that prevent them from attending the funeral or memorial service. When my own father died in 1998 many of my friends, and those of my siblings, came to see me at the visitation the evening before the service. Very few knew my father well enough to take time from work and attend a visitation an hour before the service. Even if they could have taken time away from work, they would not have come to a brief visitation before the service for fear of appearing insensitive by leaving before the service started. We must also not forget that from an economic standpoint, visitations provide an additional source of revenue in the near term. For the long term, they help maintain the funeral ritual, which is important to society and critical if our industry is to remain viable.

We also need to promote a memorial service in those cases in which the body is cremated, donated to medical science, or otherwise unavailable for a traditional funeral. As I mentioned at the beginning, when death loses meaning, the value of each life diminishes as well. The lengthy lines of people paying their respects to Senator Ted Kennedy and present during this summer's memorial service for Michael Jackson vividly illustrate that people want the opportunity to join together and share their grief while recognizing the life of the deceased. In both cases, the focal point of the public's attention was the funeral procession as it made its way to the service and then to the cemetery. With nearly all cremation memorial services, this is the one thing missing: the funeral procession, the very element that captivated a nation twice this summer. Many funeral directors think they are being progressive by having chapel closeouts and no service at the cemetery, thereby eliminating the funeral procession. It is time to reconsider this practice.

With no disrespect to the butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers who are beholden primarily to their customers, our industry has a special role in society. We bring the community together as we did with Michael Jackson and Senator Kennedy. We help perpetuate traditions. We celebrate lives. And we provide an opportunity for closure for family and friends.

If our industry devolves into a disposal service competing on price, we are not the only losers. Society loses as well. ■